Challenges of ESL Learners in Comprehending Reading Texts in English-A Classroom Study

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Abstract

Learning English can be difficult for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners for several reasons and reading of texts in English for comprehension is an even more difficult task for them. This study aims at exploring the various problems encountered by second language learners while reading various texts. Reading comprehension can be defined as an active thinking process by which a reader intentionally constructs meaning to form a deeper understanding of concepts and information presented in the text. To comprehend, readers must use information they already possess to filter, interpret, organize, and reflect upon the information they read. Efficient interpretation of the text involves a combination of word recognition skills, linking of new information to prior knowledge among other strategies. Vocabulary is one of the biggest problems when trying to work out the meaning and general idea of the text. The study used a questionnaire as a method of collecting data. The researcher also interviewed teachers of the English Program.

The genesis of this paper came from the observations, made by the researcher, of learners reading the given texts in the English reading program as well as their inability to understand what was being asked in the examination paper of most subjects.

Keywords: ESL learners, reading comprehension, word-recognition, strategies

Introduction

Reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from a text. It is the act of thinking and constructing meaning before, during and after reading. This is so done by integrating the information presented by the author with the reader's background knowledge also called 'schema'. The process of comprehending involves decoding the writer's words and then using background knowledge to construct an approximate understanding of the writer's message. Good reading comprehension requires knowledge of the cultural, value of the words and expressions and the ability to identify the thematic content of what is in the text. An efficient reader must possess the ability to read fast with good comprehension. Reading comprehension can be defined as an active thinking process by which a reader intentionally constructs meaning to form a deeper understanding of concepts and information presented in the text. Efficient interpretation of the text involves a combination of word recognition skills, linking of new information to prior knowledge and application of appropriate strategies such as locating the main idea, making connection, questioning, inferring and predicting. The comprehension process draws on many cognitive and linguistic abilities-most notably, vocabulary, recalling background knowledge, sentence processing, verbal reasoning, knowledge of print conventions and working memory.

Theoretical Foundation

It is fair to state that reading is complex yet central to any English language program. Among the four language skills, reading is most intensively and extensively studied by experts in the field of language teaching.

Although there are contrasting theories about what works best for second language learners there is no denying the fact that it is the most crucial skill to master. Firstly, learners who understand written material are able to perform better than those who do not read at all. They are able to speak and write with equivalent accuracy and thoroughness. Secondly, reading requires self-motivation and a text, whereas speaking requires other people to complement the act and writing necessitates time to perfect it. Thirdly reading is a service skill, which means that the more one reads the more effective ones' abilities become. Learners achieve the metacognitive skills. Metacognition is the act of thinking about how we think. When applied to reading, metacognitive strategies lead us to make deliberate choices about how we approach reading a passage.

There are three main theories which explain the nature of reading. The first is the traditional theory called the bottom-up processing which focuses on the printed form of the text. Second is the cognitive or the top-down processing. This cognitive view of reading enhances the role of background knowledge in addition to what appears on the printed page.

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Third is the metacognitive view, which is based on the act of comprehending a text. The metacognitive view emphasises the involvement of the readers' thinking about what he does while reading.

The Traditional View
According to Dole *et al*. (1991), in the traditional view of reading, novice readers acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that sequentially build toward comprehension ability. Readers are passive recipients of information in the text. Meaning resides in the text and the reader has to reproduce meaning. According to Nunan (1991) [12], reading in this view is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents in the quest for making sense of the text. He referred to this process as the 'bottom-up' view of reading. McCarthy (1999) has called this view 'outside-in' processing, referring to the idea that meaning exists in the printed page and is interpreted by the reader then taken in. This model of reading relies on the formal features of the language, mainly words and structure. To counteract over-reliance on form in the traditional view of reading, the cognitive view was introduced.

The Cognitive View
The 'top-down' model is in direct opposition to the 'bottom-up' model. According to Nunan (1991) [11] and Dubin and Bycina (1991), the psycholinguistic model of reading and the top-down model are in exact concordance. Goodman (1967; cited in Paran, 1996), presented reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, a process in which readers sample the text, make hypotheses, confirm or reject them, make new hypotheses, and so forth. Here, the reader rather than the text is at the heart of the reading process.

The schema theory of reading also fits within the cognitively based view of reading. Rumelhart (1977), has described schemata as "building blocks of cognition" which are used in the process of interpreting sensory data, in retrieving information from memory, in organising goals and subgoals, in allocating resources, and in guiding the flow of the processing system. Rumelhart (1977), has also stated that if our schemata are incomplete and do not provide an understanding of the incoming data from the text we will have problems processing and understanding the text.

Cognitively based views of reading comprehension emphasize the interactive nature of reading and the constructive nature of comprehension. Dole *et al*. (1991) have stated that, besides knowledge brought to bear on the reading process, a set of flexible, adaptable strategies are used to make sense of a text and to monitor ongoing understanding.

The Metacognitive View
According to Block (1992), there is now no more debate on "whether reading is a bottom-up, language-based process or a top-down, knowledge-based process." It is also no more problematic to accept the influence of background knowledge on both L1 and L2 readers. Research has gone even further to define the control readers execute on their ability to understand a text. This control, Block (1992) has referred to as metacognition.

Metacognition involves thinking about what one is doing while reading. Klein *et al*. (1991) stated that strategic readers attempt the following while reading:
- Identifying the purpose of the reading before reading
- Identifying the form or type of the text before reading

- Thinking about the general character and features of the form or type of the text. For instance, they try to locate a topic sentence and follow supporting details toward a conclusion.
- Projecting the author's purpose for writing the text (while reading it),
- Choosing, scanning, or reading in detail
- Making continuous predictions about what will occur next, based on information obtained earlier, prior knowledge, and conclusions obtained within the previous stages.

Moreover, they attempt to form a summary of what was read. Carrying out the previous steps requires the reader to be able to classify, sequence, establish whole-part relationships, compare and contrast, determine cause-effect, summarise, hypothesise and predict, infer, and conclude.

Data Collection and Analysis
Data was collected through a questionnaire. The respondents were undergraduate students of a compulsory English course. The number of respondents were around 180 learners. The researcher explored the reading difficulties through a 12-item questionnaire. There were three major problems that were evident: linguistic competence of the learners, the reading process, motivation and anxiety-related problems. Most learners reported linguistic incompetence, followed by motivation and anxiety, and third the reading process.

Table 1: Learner's responses to the questionnaire

Questionnaire items	Percent
Insufficient vocabulary in English	80%
Complexity of Sentence structures	68%
Cannot translate words in a known language	50%
Cannot get the main idea	60%
Often times the text is lengthy	90%
No interest in the topic	69%
Not my field of study	80%
Cannot infer meaning to answer questions	79%

- *I feel nervous while reading new English texts.*
- *I face problems in comprehending texts if I have no interest in the topic.*
- *I feel nervous if do not understand English texts.*
- *I face difficulty in comprehending texts which are not related to my field of study.*
- *I face problems in comprehending a text because I cannot get its main idea.*
- *I face problems in comprehending texts even if I know the meaning of all words.*
- *I cannot answer reading questions though I feel that I understand the whole text.*
- *I face problems in comprehending texts if the text is long.*

Some ESL learners who spoke fairly well said they make sense of the texts from the familiar words used therein. But this was also a hit or miss chance for them. Sometimes their guessing of words from contexts paid off and sometimes they would be completely wrong.

The study reports that some learners had major problems with comprehension because of their lack of vocabulary and background knowledge. 1. English has a vast vocabulary, and many words have multiple meanings. ESL learners struggle to understand the meaning of words they have not encountered before or the multiple meanings of some words. 2. English is

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rich in idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs, which can be confusing for ESL learners. These expressions often have figurative meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of their component words. 3. English grammar can be complex and difficult to learn. There are many rules to remember, including sentence structure, verb tenses, and word order 4. Pronunciation of some words can also be challenging. Many words are pronounced differently from how they are spelled. 5. ESL learners also struggle with the cultural context of some English texts. Understanding cultural references, jokes, and puns can be difficult without a deep knowledge of English culture.

Finally, ESL learners read more slowly than native English speakers, which can make it more difficult to comprehend complex texts or keep up with the pace of reading.

On interviewing a few teachers of the language program, it was commonly understood that reading in English can be challenging for ESL learners due to the language's complex grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references. However, with practice and dedication, it is possible to improve reading skills in English.

Teacher-1&4 stated that overall, mastering English as a second language takes time, dedication, and practice. With consistent effort and a willingness to learn, however, it is certainly achievable.

Reading Strategies Suggested

There are several strategies that a teacher can use to help students read better. Here are some effective ones:

- Encourage students to read as much as possible. Provide them with a variety of reading materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers. Encourage them to read for pleasure and help them find books that interest them.
- Set reading goals for students and help them track their progress. This will motivate them to read more and improve their reading skills.
- Teach students reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and inferring. These strategies help students to read more efficiently and understand what they are reading.
- As a teacher, model good reading habits. Show students how you read, and how you use different reading strategies. This will help them to see how reading can be enjoyable and rewarding.
- Use reading comprehension activities such as questioning, summarizing, and visualizing to help students understand what they are reading. These activities can also help students to develop critical thinking skills.
- Provide students with feedback on their reading. Let them know what they are doing well and where they need to improve. This will help them to focus on their weaknesses and improve their reading skills.
- Make reading a fun activity by organizing reading events and book clubs. This will create a positive reading culture in the classroom and encourage students to read more.
- The key to helping students read better is to create a positive reading environment that encourages them to read, provides them with the necessary strategies and support, and helps them to develop a love for reading.

Teachers 1, 2 & 3 felt that SQ3R method is an effective strategy that helps students to improve their reading comprehension and retention of information. Here is an explanation of each step:

Survey: Before starting to read a chapter or a section, survey the material by skimming the headings, subheadings, and looking at any visual aids, such as charts or graphs. This will give you a general idea of what the section is about.

Question: After surveying the material, ask yourself questions about what you just saw. For example, "What is this chapter about?" "What do I already know about this topic?" or "What questions do I have?" This will help you to focus your reading and set a purpose for your reading.

Read: Read the section carefully, paying close attention to the details. Try to answer the questions you generated in the previous step.

Recite: After reading a section, close the book and try to recite what you just read. This helps to reinforce the material and improves retention.

Review: Once you have finished reading the entire chapter or section, review the material by going back over the headings, subheadings, and summaries. This helps to consolidate the information and makes it easier to remember.

By using the SQ3R method, students can improve their reading comprehension and retention of information. It is a useful strategy for studying textbooks and other written materials.

Apart from the SQ3R method, there are several other strategies that can be used to improve reading comprehension and retention. Here are a few examples:

- **Pre-reading Activities:** Engage students in pre-reading activities such as brainstorming, activating prior knowledge, and predicting what they will read. This helps to prepare them for the material and increases their interest in the topic.
- **Active Reading:** Encourage students to actively engage with the text as they read. This includes underlining or highlighting important points, taking notes, and summarizing the material as they go along.
- **Graphic Organizers:** Use graphic organizers such as concept maps, Venn diagrams, and timelines to help students organize the material and make connections between ideas.
- **Close Reading:** Teach students how to do close reading, which involves reading a text multiple times to gain a deeper understanding of the material. This helps students to identify important details, understand complex concepts, and make inferences.
- **Collaborative Reading:** Encourage students to read and discuss the material in groups. This allows them to share their insights and perspectives, ask questions, and clarify any confusion they may have.
- **Post-reading Activities:** Engage students in post-reading activities such as summarizing the material, writing a response, or creating a visual representation of the information. This helps to reinforce the material and encourages students to reflect on what they have learned.

Conclusion

Overall, the key to improving reading comprehension and retention is to engage students in a variety of reading strategies that help them to actively engage with the material, make connections between ideas, and reflect on what they have learned. The present study leads to the conclusion that teaching metacognitive strategies could bring about a significant improvement in the reading skills of ESL learners.

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